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# Beyond the Secure Base: Why the Maternal Really Matters

Gavin Miller

One of the most politically prestigious modern ideologies of motherhood is provided by attachment theory; this is certainly the case in the UK, and the same may be true of many other developed countries. Unlike psychoanalytic theories of the mother-child relation, attachment theory, with its emphasis on ethological comparisons and infant observation, seems to give a properly scientific account of motherhood. It must certainly appear to policy-makers to be more 'evidence-based' than psychoanalytic theories, which tend to rely more upon the interpretation of clinical material furnished by psychopathological adults.

Attachment theory's application to the political realm (which was particularly marked in the early days of New Labour) has given the mother a central role in the UK's government-funded child welfare programme. The perceived relationship between the psychological and the political was spelled out, for instance, in academic texts such as *The Politics of Attachment* (1996), which carries a preface by Patricia Hewitt, and includes contributions by other New Labour figures such as Tessa Jowell, Mo Mowlam, and Helena Kennedy.<sup>1</sup> The 'Sure Start' child welfare programme correspondingly popularises and prescribes the ideal of secure attachment. 'Babies and young children need support as they begin a journey of self-discovery from a base of loving and secure relationships', claims one Sure Start booklet<sup>2</sup>: in this way, 'A Strong Child' will be produced.<sup>3</sup>

In this political application of attachment theory, the mother is required to provide an early secure attachment, a 'Sure Start', for her child, in order to produce an adult with enough psychological security to function properly in modern society. In demanding that mothers provide secure attachment, the UK state requires that the mother perform a function akin to Calvin's God: by bestowing her love upon her children, she predestines them to the virtues of good citizenship; if she fails to do so, they are damned to economic, social, and psychological failure.

God, in fact, had it easy compared to the modern mother demanded by UK public policy. His love was at least supererogatory: we might beseech Him for it, but He was under no obligation to supply it. Today's mother has no such liberty. She is duty-bound to love her child; and if she is not quite criminal for failing to do so, she is at least abnormal.

Where the love of mother for child is not apparent, said John Bowlby himself, then ‘all are disposed to judge the condition as pathological’.<sup>4</sup>

The healthy mother produces children who will grow up to be adults whose anxieties are tranquilised by proximity to others: the securely attached individual, unlike their pathological brother and sister, can huddle closer to their nearest and dearest, and find comfort in this nearness – just as once he or she fled to mother’s arms when confronted by a barking dog, the roar of traffic in the street, a peal of thunder. In the nineteenth century, religion was supposed to be the opium of the people; in the twenty-first century, people are the opium of the people, and it is the mother’s job to begin this dependency. The welfare state exists not because excessive wealth is an injustice: ‘the old arguments for comprehensive social security no longer convince, because both their economic assumptions and the political consensus to which they appeal have been undermined’.<sup>5</sup> Rather it exists to foster the secure attachment which immunises the good citizen to anxiety and insecurity; it exists, in other words, to prepare the citizenry for neo-liberal society. Children with optimal attachment, according to Jeremy Holmes, ‘show the germs of good citizenship: generosity and co-operativeness based on self-confidence’, while, on the other hand, ‘insecure patterns of attachment contain the seeds of social pathology’, such as isolation, aggression, and anxiety.<sup>6</sup> The effects of neo-liberalism are duly psychologised: if a citizen responds to the exigencies of the labour market, the uncertainty of economic boom and bust, and the erosion of the welfare state, by feeling anxious, isolated, or aggrieved, then this may be traced to insecure attachment.

Attachment theory has become a modern version of the bad theology that once legitimated social injustice. Its weaknesses derive, though, from the basic principles that Bowlby used to characterise and explain the mother-child relation. Bowlby was trying to put on a scientific footing the love of mother for child, a phenomenon that had been the focus of object relations psychoanalysis in the form developed by Ian Suttie (1889–1935). Suttie had argued in his only book, *The Origins of Love and Hate* (1935), that the child ‘is born with a simple attachment-to-mother who is the sole source of food and protection’.<sup>7</sup> In the transition from Suttie’s notion of attachment to Bowlby’s, however, much was lost.

Most obviously, Bowlby’s theory is more heavily gendered. While Suttie might well have (unfairly) regarded the unloving mother as ill, he would have extended this diagnosis equally to the unloving father. Western culture in general was infected by a

‘taboo on tenderness’, Suttie believed. In drawing attention to this taboo, his aim was as much to liberate tenderness in men, as to prescribe it for women.

But beyond this often remarked problem in attachment theory, Bowlby’s greater error was to construe the mother-child relation too narrowly. Only one kind of intersubjectivity seems to have scientific legitimacy, and this is because it can be woven into Darwinian and cybernetic accounts of biology: the child oscillates between the dominance of exploratory and proximity-seeking cybernetic subsystems, the latter having emerged as a survival mechanism early in human evolution – the child that spontaneously returns to mother when startled is less likely to perish. The (m)other, then, is an antidote to fear. Relief from anxiety is the central, scientifically-approved form of intersubjectivity; we relate to our (m)others as an atheist in a fox-hole turns towards God. All the other ways of relating to others are somehow scientifically unreal (or, even worse, the theory is crudely stretched to cover them, so that commentators speak of the ‘secure base functions of romantic bonds’).<sup>8</sup>

Why study the maternal now? One good reason is that motherhood is too important to be left to attachment theory’s narrow concepts. There is surely something vitally true in Bowlby’s idea that we are born with the capacity to relate. But there is no point in depriving friendship and love of their true meaning and modalities in order to fit them on the Procrustean bed of attachment theory. We do not relate to others solely as tranquilising instruments with which to relieve our fear and anxiety; there is surely some positive and intrinsic (rather than instrumental or extrinsic) value in our close personal relations. Motherhood is nowadays thought of as the kernel of intersubjectivity; if this primary relationship is not properly construed, then our understanding of adult relations of love and friendship will also be faulty. Then, as has happened with attachment theory, our faulty ideas of community and society will undermine our political theories and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Politics of Attachment: Towards a Secure Society*, ed. by Sebastian Kraemer and Jane Roberts (London: Free Association, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *An Introduction to the Framework* ([n.p.]:[no pub.], [2005])

[http://www.surestart.gov.uk/\\_doc/P0000285.pdf](http://www.surestart.gov.uk/_doc/P0000285.pdf) [accessed 11 November 2008], p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Introduction*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> John Bowlby, *Attachment* (London: Hogarth and The Institute for Psycho-analysis, 1969), p. 242.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Marris, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Attachment in Private and Public Life* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Holmes, 'Attachment Theory: A Secure Base for Policy?', in *The Politics of Attachment: Towards a Secure Society*, ed. by Sebastian Kraemer and Jane Roberts (London: Free Association, 1996), pp. 27–42 (p. 33).

<sup>7</sup> Ian D. Suttie, *The Origins of Love and Hate* (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Feeney and Patricia Noller, *Adult Attachment* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage, 1996), p. 79.